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Chapter 12

# Was the European Renaissance Unique?

1350 CE to 1650 CE

## Taking Power in the Fifteenth Century

Traditional stories related by storytellers, or *griots,* in Mali today tell how the land was ruled by a fish. It swam up the Djoliba River every morning to Kukiya, where it sat on a throne to rule over the people. The *Kitab al fattash* (seventeenth century), an Arabic account of the Songhay Empire, tells how the fish was killed by two brothers from Medina in Arabia.

This may sound outlandishly far-fetched, but the story addresses a very real theme in West African history—the tension between its Islamic culture and its much older traditional culture. For the states in this part of Africa, including Gao, Mali, and Songhay, the Niger River was, like the Nile in Egypt, the source of all life. Little surprise then that myth and history would create such a fabulous character as a fish-king.

If the royal fish in the story represents the Songhay people's deep riverine history, the brothers from Medina represent the coming of Islam to the region. Like all cultures which undergo a change, the ancient traditions of western Africa were not eradicated by the new Islamic culture; the older ways persisted, as reflected in other stories, which tell how the fish did not, in fact, die but continued to rule underwater. This seems a fitting metaphor for how old ways continue, often guiding and informing new traditions from below the surface.

In some stories, the fish is associated with the father of Songhay's best-known leader, the Askiya Muhammad. *Askiyas,* or "leaders," were seen as men with occult powers, relating to ancient African animist religious traditions, as well as devout Muslims, an apparently impossible paradox, according to "orthodox" Islamic notions. But such apparent paradoxes required working out through

## THINKING ABOUT RENAISSANCES

### What Is a Renaissance?

- In turning to Classical-era texts of Greece and Rome, Petrarch hoped to connect with a lost "spirit" of the antiquity, thereby improving his own times.

### How Was the World Shrinking in This Period?

- While there was no doubt panic at the Ottoman conquest, the notion of Europe and the "East" as two distinct entities was, to use a technical term, "fuzzy" at this point in history.

### What Is the Role of Cultural Producers?

- While elite intellectuals in several societies turned to ancient texts to explain the present, other societies did not have this option.

### What Relevance Does This Period Have for Nonstate Societies?

- Most societies do not preserve their histories in writing; and although they have cultural producers, these tend to be oral in nature and are therefore more difficult to trace historically.

### Conclusion

- All societies experience new developments; all of them look over their shoulders for a sense of continuity or to retrieve something they feel they may have lost along the way.

stories, and this is a worldwide phenomenon; new leaders needed to create a basis for their legitimacy, whether in China, the Americas, or Africa. And in Africa this process was mediated by *griots* as much as by official "court" historians.

## Introduction

While Islam may have arrived in West Africa with Arab traders of the tenth and eleventh centuries, it took hundreds of years to percolate down and establish its own, unique characteristics there. Likewise, around the world, in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, cultures and political entities were encountering each other through trade, war, and migration. In the last quarter of the thirteenth century Marco Polo traveled to China and wrote one of the first Western accounts of life there (*The Travels of Marco Polo,* 1300). In the mid-fourteenth century, Ibn Batutta, a Muslim from Morocco, traveled to India, China, and Mali. He penned an account of his journey (*The Journey of Ibn Batutta,* 1355), in which he covered perhaps as much as three times the distance as Marco Polo. In the early fifteenth century a Chinese eunuch in the court of the Ming dynasty, Admiral Zheng-He (1371–1433) traveled to southern Asia seven times and then sailed as far as the east coast of Africa. And only a few decades later, in 1492, the Genoese sea captain Christoforo Colombo (Christopher Columbus) crossed the Atlantic and bumped into the New World. The anthropologist Eric Wolf argues that "These voyages were not isolated adventures but manifestations of the forces that were drawing the continents into more encompassing relationships and would soon make the world a unified stage for human action."[1] We are not there yet, but the seeds of globalization were stirring.

Bearing in mind the formation of this "unified stage," whatever was happening in Africa was also happening in other places. Not only were people making connections across ever larger distances, but such journeys often resulted from a certain new impetus—part economic, part cultural—that was stitching the world together. Historians have traditionally looked to Europe's "Renaissance" as the epicenter of all global revitalization in this period. And there were many noteworthy developments here at this time. But today's historians are skeptical that the Renaissance represented a genuine historical period—or was really new—or that its attributes were exclusively European. Around the world we see glimmerings of similar characteristics, in particular urbanization, economic expansion, and new stories of legitimation. Just as with the *griots* of Songhay or the *Kitab al-Fattash,* leaders, dynasties, empires, and what we shall call, rather dryly, "cultural producers" began casting around for ways to make sense of their world, legitimize their power, and find a way forward. Often, this entailed looking back and tying oneself into older traditions.

The Songhay revitalization, or Renaissance, was not unlike Europe's or those of the Ottoman Empire in the Middle East and the Ming dynasty in China. In centers of power, politics were changing and new ways of explaining the changes were coming into being that justified the ambitions and traditions of the winners. This was not necessarily a case of "a rising tide floats all boats"; often, one group's success meant another's downfall, or at least stasis.

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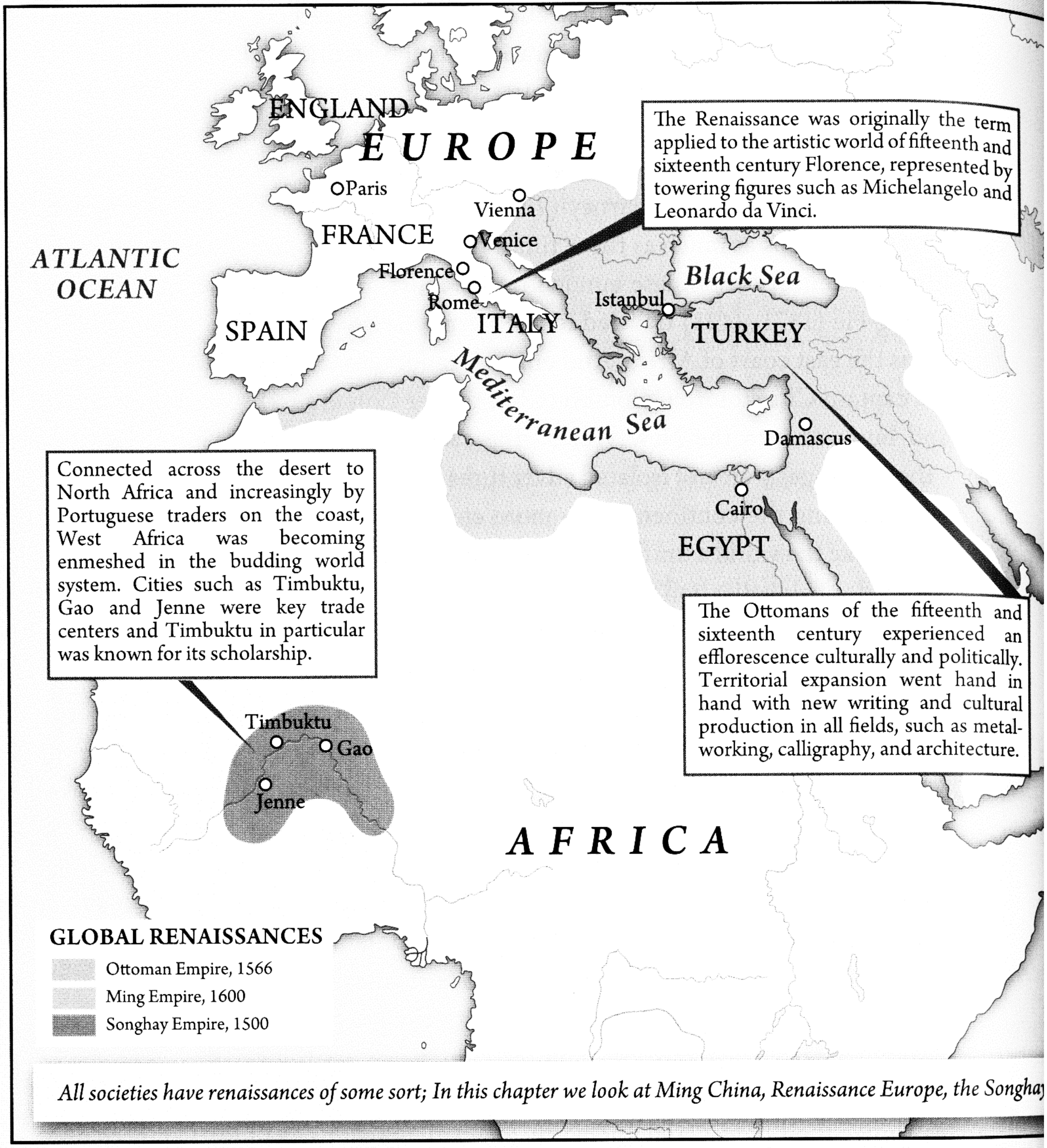
[1] Eric Wolf, *Europe and the People Without History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 24.

## MAPPING THE PAST


ENGLAND
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ATLANTIC OCEAN
Florence
Rome
ITALY
SPAIN
Black Sea
Istanbul
TURKEY
Mediterranean Sea
Damascus
Cairo
EGYPT
Timbuktu
Gao
Jenne
AFRICA
GLOBAL RENAISSANCES
Ottoman Empire, 1566
Ming Empire, 1600
Songhay Empire, 1500

The Renaissance was originally the term applied to the artistic world of fifteenth and sixteenth century Florence, represented by towering figures such as Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci.

Connected across the desert to North Africa and increasingly by Portuguese traders on the coast, West Africa was becoming enmeshed in the budding world system. Cities such as Timbuktu, Gao and Jenne were key trade centers and Timbuktu in particular was known for its scholarship.

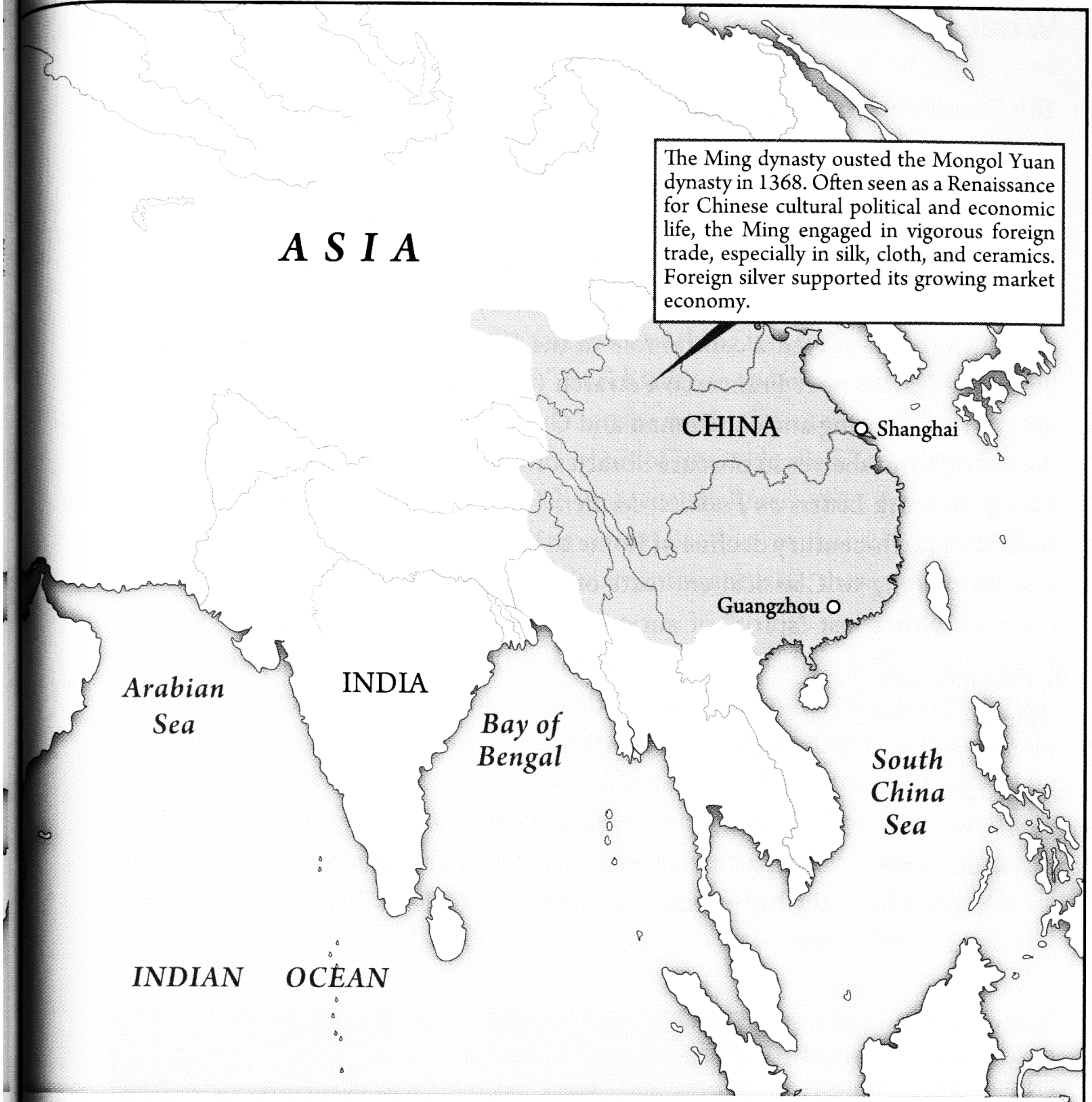
The Ottomans of the fifteenth and sixteenth century experienced an efflorescence culturally and politically. Territorial expansion went hand in hand with new writing and cultural production in all fields, such as metal-working, calligraphy, and architecture.

*All societies have renaissances of some sort; In this chapter we look at Ming China, Renaissance Europe, the Songha*

**MAP 12.1 GLOBAL RENAISSANCES**

## TIMELINE

- **1368–1644** Ming Dynasty, China
- **1450** First movable type printing outside China
- **1405–1433** Voyages of Zheng-He, Chinese admiral
- **1452–1519** Leonardo da Vinci


ASIA
CHINA
Shanghai
Guangzhou
INDIA
Arabian Sea
Bay of Bengal
South China Sea
INDIAN OCEAN

The Ming dynasty ousted the Mongol Yuan dynasty in 1368. Often seen as a Renaissance for Chinese cultural political and economic life, the Ming engaged in vigorous foreign trade, especially in silk, cloth, and ceramics. Foreign silver supported its growing market economy.

*mpire of West Africa and the Ottoman Empire.*

**1520–66**
**Reign of Ottoman emperor, Suleyman the Magnificent**

**1464–1492**
**Reign of Sonni Ali Ber, Songhay**

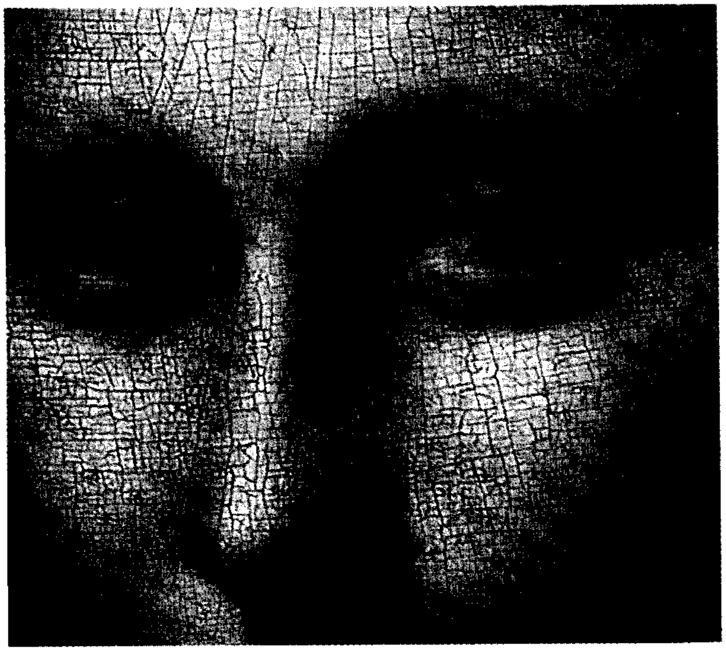
## What Is a Renaissance?

The Florentine writer Georgio Vasari (d. 1574) is credited with coining the Italian term *Rinascita* to describe the artistic world of fifteenth- to sixteenth-century Florence. The two towering figures of the Renaissance are, of course, Michelangelo di Lodovico Buonarroti Simoni (1475–1564) and Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519), both of whose work has received more critical and popular attention than perhaps any other artists in history.

Writers also played a central role in the Renaissance, earliest among them being the Italian poet Francesco Petrarch (1304–1374), whose fame lay in the idea of resuscitating ancient Roman and Greek texts, many of which he himself dusted off from shelves in obscure libraries and published in new translations. In his classic work *Letters on Familiar Matters* (1366), Petrarch portrays the period from the fourth-century decline of Rome to his own time as a dark and barbarous one. In turning to Classical-era texts of Greece and Rome, Petrarch hoped to connect with a lost "spirit" of antiquity, thereby improving his own times—rediscovering some classical *mojo*, you might say (borrowing an African word that would enter the English language through slaves in America).

The Renaissance was not a concrete event, like World War I, but an invention of historians, a *periodization*, marking off a particular time period.

The Renaissance was not a concrete event, like World War I, but an invention of historians, a *periodization*, marking off a particular time period. Of particular relevance here were the historians Jules Michelet (1798–1874), a Frenchman, and



**The Eyes Have It** Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*, probably the most famous painting in the world, created during the European Renaissance. At least in the art world a new spirit was at work in certain places.

the Swiss Jacob Burkhardt (1818–1897). Michelet was writing with the values and concerns of the French Revolution (1789) very much in mind and looked back at the fifteenth century as the beginning of this awakening—of the revolutionary causes of *liberté, egalité, fraternité* ("liberty, equality, fraternity"). Michelet focused on French cultural achievements of that period, including the works of French writers such as François Rabelais (ca. 1494–ca. 1553) and Michel de Montaigne (1533–1592), and he included William Shakespeare (1564–1616), who, although not French, was nonetheless influential. Michelet saw in the literature, politics, and science of the Renaissance nothing less than the "discovery of the world, and the discovery of man." Burkhardt, on the other hand, focused on northern Italy in the same period; and there he saw in the intellectual and artistic achievements the emergence of nothing short of "individualism" and the "modern man." Both these historians could well be accused of *presentism*, something that afflicts many historians, as historian Jerry Brotton explains: "Rather than describing the world of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, these writers were in fact describing their own."[2]

For most historians the key lies in the *Re* of *Renaissance*. The concept of rebirth meant that poets, writers, artists, scientists and cultural producers of all kinds, looked back to an earlier "golden age" as a source of inspiration. Petrarch, who lived through the plague, considered Greco-Roman culture, represented by its literature, models to emulate. European society needed a new direction in the aftermath of the plague: "By the fourteenth century, when climate change, famine, and disease undermined so many old certainties, some intellectuals expanded their interpretation of the ancient classics into a general vision of social rebirth."[3]

In around 1450 three individuals, Johann Gutenburg, Peter Schoffer, and Johan Fust, in Mainz, Germany, engineered the first movable type printing (outside of China, which did it several hundred years earlier), which allowed the mass production of books. A goldsmith, a calligrapher, and a financier, respectively, these three brought about what many considered the most important invention of the era. As literature became increasingly available, at the same time whole new areas of inquiry were introduced from the ancient world, to be studied alongside the strictly theological: medicine, philology, history, politics, and astronomy. There emerged a new breed of scholars, known as "humanists" (responsible for establishing the predominant Western educational model—the humanities), who took all subjects under their wing, able to move seamlessly between poetry and astronomy and back, often with a stopover to practice statecraft.

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[2] Jerry Brotton, *The Renaissance Bazaar: From the Silk Road to Michelangelo* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 33.

[3] Ian Morris, *Why the West Rules—For Now: The Patterns of History and What They Tell Us About the Future* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2011), 418.

Politics is a key ingredient here, for many humanist scholars looked for employment in government positions, using literary and rhetorical skills such as translation, critical reading, negotiation, and composition in the service of the state. Examples of such "Renaissance men" include Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527), author of the infamous government handbook *The Prince*, written originally in the hope of gaining employment with the Medici family of Florence, and Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam (1466–1536), who wrote, among other books, *The Education of a Christian Prince*, originally for the future Hapsburg emperor Charles V (r. 1519–1558). When no official position was forthcoming from him, he sent a copy to England's King Henry VIII (r. 1509–1547). These were two very different Christian princes, but with honed, humanist-inspired rhetorical skills, Erasmus could construct any argument upon demand, like the best PR firm today. Humanist politicians, however, were as diverse as the subjects in which they excelled, which famously crossed the line between the theoretical and the practical: the creative minds of such Renaissance men "moved effortlessly between studios and the corridors of power, taking time off from theorizing to lead armies, hold office, and advise rulers."[4]

Because it is an artificial historical period, historians today argue over the dates of the Renaissance and even over whether there was a Renaissance—the doubters not denying that "new things were happening" in Europe but suggesting that such developments were a continuation of the Middle Ages. This point of view, referred to somewhat dramatically as the "revolt of the medievalists," sees many of the traits associated with the Renaissance by scholars such as Burkhardt as already in place in the twelfth century. For this reason, many historians prefer to use the term "early modern" or "late medieval" to describe this period. These arguments have resulted in divided views over the Renaissance, leading historians, as William Bowsma puts it, to "sorting data into two heaps, one marked 'continuities,' the other marked 'innovations.'"[5] Such is the business of historians. If it was just a continuation of historical trends, then is the focus on this period another example of Eurocentric history, in which European historians have described Europe's "brilliance" so as to legitimate its conquest of large parts of the globe which followed? Jerry Brotton suggests that, "Disputes about dating the Renaissance have become so intense that the validity of the term is now in doubt. Does it have any meaning at all any more? Is it really possible to separate the

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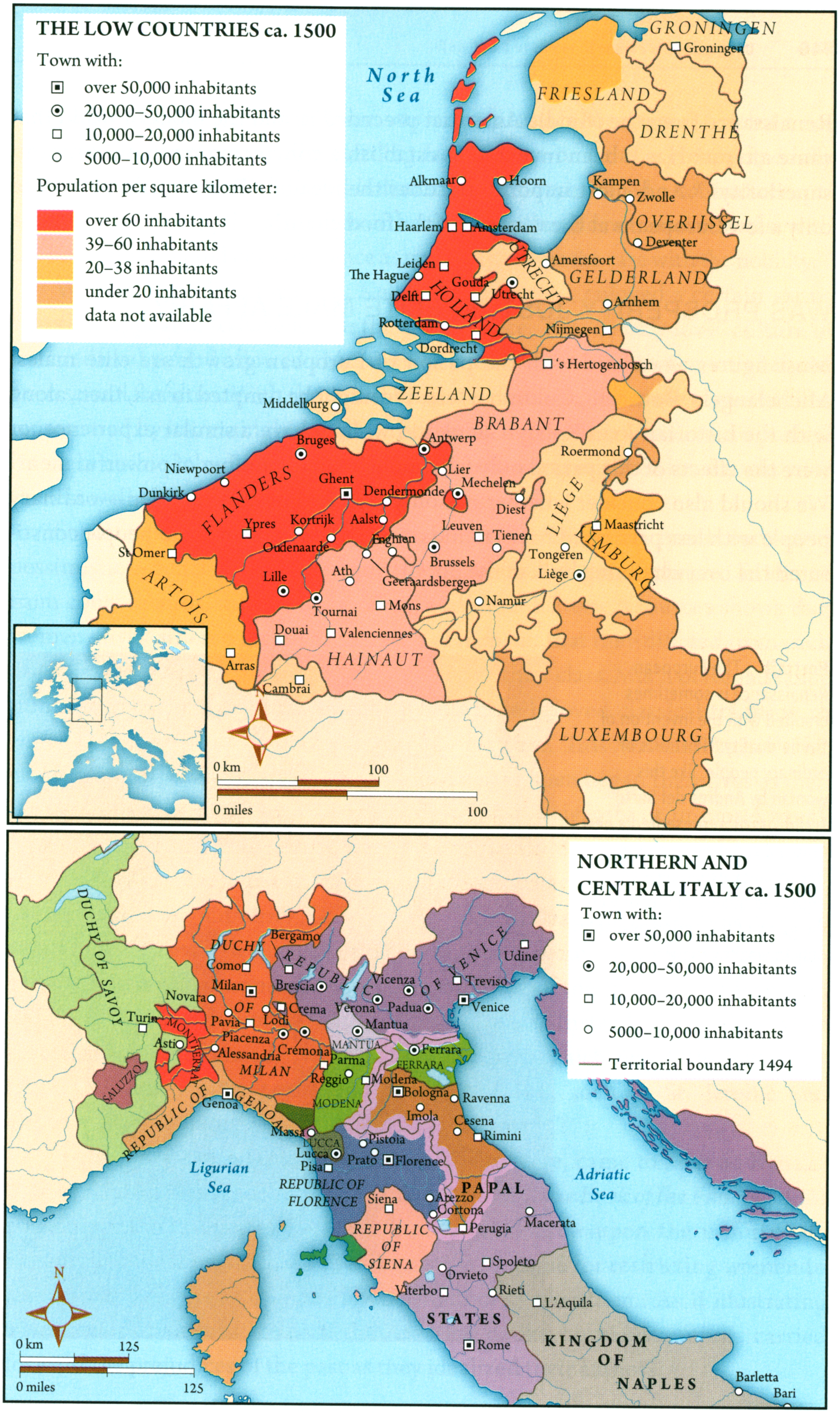
[4] Ibid., 419.

[5] William J. Bowsma, "The Renaissance and the Drama of Western History," in *A Usable Past: Essays in European Cultural History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 350.

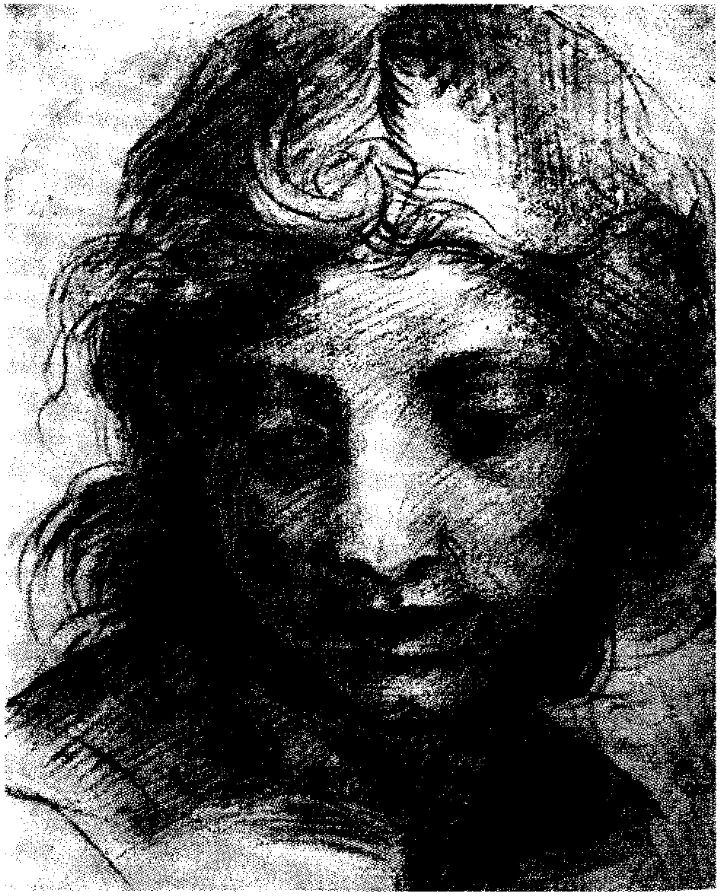

THE LOW COUNTRIES ca. 1500
Town with:
▣ over 50,000 inhabitants
⦿ 20,000–50,000 inhabitants
□ 10,000–20,000 inhabitants
○ 5000–10,000 inhabitants
Population per square kilometer:
over 60 inhabitants
39–60 inhabitants
20–38 inhabitants
under 20 inhabitants
data not available
North Sea
GRONINGEN
Groningen
FRIESLAND
DRENTHE
Alkmaar
Hoorn
Kampen
Zwolle
OVERIJSSEL
Deventer
Haarlem
Amsterdam
UTRECHT
Amersfoort
Leiden
The Hague
HOLLAND
Gouda
Utrecht
GELDERLAND
Delft
Arnhem
Rotterdam
Nijmegen
Dordrecht
's Hertogenbosch
ZEELAND
Middelburg
BRABANT
Bruges
Antwerp
Roermond
Niewpoort
Lier
FLANDERS
Ghent
Mechelen
Dunkirk
Dendermonde
LIÈGE
Diest
Ypres
Kortrijk
Aalst
Maastricht
Leuven
Enghien
Tienen
St Omer
Oudenaarde
Brussels
Tongeren
LIMBURG
Ath
Liège
ARTOIS
Lille
Geeraardsbergen
Tournai
Mons
Namur
Douai
Valenciennes
HAINAUT
Arras
Cambrai
LUXEMBOURG
0 km
100
0 miles
100
NORTHERN AND CENTRAL ITALY ca. 1500
Town with:
▣ over 50,000 inhabitants
⦿ 20,000–50,000 inhabitants
□ 10,000–20,000 inhabitants
○ 5000–10,000 inhabitants
Territorial boundary 1494
DUCHY OF SAVOY
DUCHY OF MILAN
REPUBLIC OF VENICE
Bergamo
Como
Udine
Milan
Brescia
Vicenza
Treviso
Novara
Crema
Verona
Padua
Venice
Turin
Pavia
Lodi
Mantua
MONTFERRAT
Piacenza
Asti
Cremona
MANTUA
Ferrara
Alessandria
Parma
FERRARA
SALUZZO
Reggio
Modena
Bologna
Ravenna
REPUBLIC OF GENOA
Genoa
MODENA
Imola
Cesena
Rimini
Massa
LUCCA
Pistoia
Lucca
Prato
Florence
Pisa
Ligurian Sea
REPUBLIC OF FLORENCE
Siena
PAPAL STATES
Adriatic Sea
Arezzo
Cortona
REPUBLIC OF SIENA
Perugia
Macerata
Spoleto
Orvieto
Viterbo
Rieti
L'Aquila
Rome
KINGDOM OF NAPLES
Barletta
Bari
N
0 km
125
0 miles
125

**MAP 12.2 THE LOW COUNTRIES AND NORTHERN ITALY, ca. 1500** By 1500 the Low Countries (**a**) and northern Italy (**b**) had both developed high-density urban populations. Both areas featured prominently in the European Renaissance. Trade between towns and with the wider world was a major feature of both regions.

Renaissance from the Middle Ages that preceded it, and the modern world that came after it? Has it been invented to establish a convincing myth of European superiority?"[6] And, most importantly, does the idea of a Renaissance pertain to only a few Europeans at the very top of the food chain?

## WAS PROSPERITY JUST AN ELITE MALE AFFAIR?

Most figures associated with the period of European growth are elite males: Michelangelo, Botticelli, Columbus, etc. We might be tempted to ask, then, along with the historian Joan Kelley-Gadol, did women have a similar experience, or were the effects of this period only felt among a small number of powerful men?[7] We should also consider whether not only women but nonelite men—ordinary people with less privileged backgrounds—were affected, for these people constituted the overwhelming bulk of the population.



**Portrait** The European Renaissance is sometimes credited with the invention of "individuality." Portraits of ordinary people, like this woman by Andrea del Sarto (1486–1530), represented a new ethos. But did women of the Renaissance experience an improved quality of life, or were the gains of the period available only to wealthy men?

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[6] Brotton, *The Renaissance Bazaar,* 20.

[7] Joan Kelley-Gadol, "Did Women Have a Renaissance?" in *Becoming Visible: Women in European History,* ed. Renate Bridental, Claudia Koonz, and Susan Stuard, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987).

Kelley-Gadol argues that "there was no renaissance for women—at least not during the Renaissance.... The startling fact is that women as a group, especially among the classes that dominated Italian urban life, experienced a contradiction of social and personal options that men of their classes either did not, as was the case with the bourgeoisie, or did not experience as markedly, as was the case with the nobility."[8]

Well-born medieval women, Kelley-Gadol argues, enjoyed a certain status that they appeared to have lost in the Renaissance. The "courtly love" culture of the medieval period allowed at least propertied women a certain emotional and even sexual freedom. With the rise of the state, however, and of the business class represented by increasingly wealthy merchants, upper-class women were pushed into less visible roles. Well-born women, therefore, experienced losses, while for the less well-born precious little changed.

Scholars since Kelley-Gadol have mostly agreed with her broad—and pessimistic—conclusions, although they have added some nuance. Evidence from court records, marital documents, and other historical sources shows that women's lives differed greatly from those of men but that they differed from each other as well; and this difference depended upon their class. Much of Renaissance thinking on gender came from scripture and the beloved classical tradition to which Renaissance thinkers looked for inspiration. This was unfortunate for women. Plato, in his work *Timeus,* declared that women began their lives as men and were "regenerated" into women if they lived "cowardly or immoral lives." Aristotle, in his *Politics,* ranks women just above slaves in the natural hierarchy and adds that, because of their natural inferiority, they should always be subject to their husband's authority. Galen, another Greek "expert" on women, saw the vagina, an "internal" sexual organ, as the source of women's obvious inferiority. Little of the much-trumpeted progressive thinking of the Renaissance was used to throw out such ignorant and prejudiced ideas. Instead, these ideas were blended, or "harmonized," with church ideology, which was little better. As William Caferro puts it, the early church fathers, such as St. Jerome and St. Augustine, "expressed an unmistakable misogyny."[9]

Both Christian and Classical traditions, therefore, came to bear on Renaissance women. Writers such as Leon Battista Alberti (*The Book of the Family,* 1432) and Francesco Barbaro (*On Wifely Duties,* 1416) drew upon the unfortunate works of Aristotle, Xenophon, and Augustine to argue for restricting women to the domestic sphere and imposing male authority over them. As if illustrating the dictum that books are made out of other books, humanist authors carried forward the prejudices of the past as they idealized their authors.

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[8] Ibid., 19.

[9] William Caferro, *Contesting the Renaissance* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 63.

And such ideas often fueled deadly consequences, as Caferro points out: “From 1480 to 1700 more women were executed for witchcraft than for any other crime, and the number of women burned at the stake exceeded those who gained sainthood by 100:1.”[10] The church provided one solution to the problem of prostitution and witchcraft, which was to seclude single women in convents, thus taking them, and their nasty habit of inducing social chaos, out of circulation. But although most women managed to avoid burning at the stake, plenty of lesser indignities awaited them. Restricted from property ownership and often from inheritance by variations of Roman law, which posited the idea of *patria potestas*, the ultimate male power in the household, women were also restricted from many types of work. “Alewife” was a common female medieval role, that of beer maker, which, absent modern ideas of artisanal brewing, was a less-than-choice profession. Prostitution was widespread, while “servant” was the most common female occupation in many European countries in this period.

Other historians offer a somewhat more positive view of women’s experiences in the Renaissance, promoting the rising-tide-floats-all-boats model. Margaret King, for example, argues that although the majority of women continued to be stifled at home, in the workplace and in the church there were growing numbers who rose above the constraints of their sex. These included the likes of England’s Queen Elizabeth I (r. 1558–1603), France’s “queen consort” Catherine de Medici (1519–1589), and the Venetian noblewoman Caterina Cornaro (1454–1510), who became queen of Cyprus and, as such, hosted a literary salon that became well known. Such women broke with tradition in multiple ways. King sees a kind of “Renaissance feminism” at work among such women, even if widespread change did not occur on all social levels: “these women wielded the picks of their understanding to build a better city for ladies.”[11] But for regular women, residence in such cities was usually precluded.

## HOW WAS WEALTH DISTRIBUTED?

History has tended to tell the tale of the wealthy. European revitalization is a perfect example of this, for while wealthy European merchants and princes were paying unprecedented sums for works of art and building palatial homes to commemorate themselves (and indulging in ever more elaborate funerals, of all things), the vast majority of people were continuing to live in the kind of abject poverty that was normal in the premodern world. “European high culture,” if not an oxymoron, was at least a distinctly minority affair. One might imagine

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[10] Ibid., 76.

[11] Margaret L. King, *Women of the Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 239.

Florence, Italy, as a place with a high standard of living; but this was only true if we define Florence as a society limited to a few elite families and their hangers-on. Material conditions across Europe in this period were highly unstable for most people. Plague popped up frequently, though with nothing like the viciousness of its fourteenth-century performance. Hunger was endemic, caused by regular failures of harvests as well as war and the simple limitations of the early modern economy. As the Italian historian Piero Camporesi describes in his book *Bread of Dreams* (1996), the majority of the population lived either near starvation or in mortal fear of it. As a result, he argues, most people lived their lives in altered mental states—whether from hunger, the ingestion of rotten foods, or the more purposeful alcoholism, to "take the edge off" their hunger. This gives a new twist to the idea of "high culture." Alternatively, they ate poppy seeds, which were regularly rolled into the bread dough in Italian cities such as Venice, along with half-rotten vegetable matter, fermenting grains, and shop-floor sweepings, in order to get high and forget their misery for a while. Camporesi suggests that this may have been a kind of self-medication and not driven by the leadership, who might well have had incentive to keep the masses drugged: "One could doubtless regard this as having been directed not so much from above (as is sometimes supposed) as desired and sought by the masses themselves, consumed as they were by disease, hunger, nocturnal fears, and daytime obsessions."[12]

Having said that, these conditions may have represented an improvement from what came before. The period from 1450 to 1600 saw population growth in most parts of the globe. That, at the very least, means that more people were surviving into adulthood. The European population had been around 70 million in 1300. Having been devastated by the plague, by 1600 it had rebounded to reach 90 million. While growth was slow in the early decades after the plague, the survivors—especially in the southern states around the Mediterranean, such as the Italian city states—were able to benefit economically from the vibrant commercial activity of that sea, which was connected to the vast empires of Eurasia, including India and China. The populations of Asian states towered over those of Europe. China had as many as 200 million people. France, with 17 million, was dwarfed by the Ottoman Empire's 25 million. India, although not completely unified territorially, had some 110 million people in 1600. These numbers made Europe relatively insignificant.

But this growing population was increasingly urban. Urbanism itself led to intensification of cultural and economic production and ultimately to what many scholars see as the beginnings of capitalism; capitalism's majordomo, Karl Marx, saw the period between 1300 to 1500 as the beginnings of capitalism proper.

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[12] Piero Camporesi, *Bread of Dreams: Food and Fantasy in Early Modern Europe* (Chicago: Polity Press, 1989), 18.

Cities had been very much on the rise in pre-plague Europe, and these had been new entities, giving birth to distinct modes of behavior. But many of Europe's post-plague cities, in particular Florence, Venice, Genoa, and northern ones such as Antwerp and Amsterdam, were commercial centers where merchants were gaining political and economic power. The self-same merchants, and the princes and sovereigns they served (and to whom they loaned money), in turn represented a clientele for the burgeoning population of artists and scholars who were such a part of the Renaissance.

Was European revitalization, then, just a case of businessmen sponsoring artists? Certainly that was a part of it. The city of Florence commissioned Michelangelo to sculpt the biblical character David, best known to many around the world today as a fridge magnet (he chose to portray him naked, scandalizing many, even though his art referenced the style of the ancient Greeks, which legitimated it in the eyes of many). By the time the sculpture was the talk of the town the world's most famous artist was already in Rome, chasing down more lucrative assignments; he later ended up in the Ottoman sultan's palace in Istanbul, an artist for hire, willing to cross cultural barriers to work where the pay was best.

## How Was the World Shrinking in This Period?

The European revitalization was a kind of cultural and economic flowering; it was a looking-back-while-moving-forward, an expression of energetic cultural output in multiple fields, resulting from population growth, cultural exchange, and increasing prosperity. But the word *global* is relevant in two main ways in any discussion about the period. The first is how European economic activity and culture were projected out from Europe via explorers and traders, who, as good Renaissance men, sallied forth to discover, conquer, and harvest the world and its riches.

We will discuss the idea of exploration in Chapter 13, but for now it will suffice to mention Prince Henry "the Navigator" of Portugal (1394–1460), Christopher Columbus (ca. 1451–1506), and Bartolomeu Dias (ca. 1451–1500). Prince Henry poured resources into maritime exploration, no doubt motivated in part by curiosity, greed for African gold and slaves, and, strangely, a desire to discover a mythic Christian king in Africa named Prester John, who, he believed, could aid Europe in its struggle against the infidel Ottoman Empire. Columbus, an Italian in the pay of the Spanish, had read the ancient Greco-Roman geographer Ptolemy (b. ca. 90 CE) and believed that if he sailed west from Portugal he would end up in China. Dias, following Henry's orders, sailed south, until he rounded the southern tip of Africa, the Cape of Good Hope, thus opening up a sea route to the east and its lucrative markets.

All of these events had incalculable consequences for world history, ultimately joining the two hemispheres and making a global history possible, for better or worse. Such events could be considered haphazard and unrelated, but that is not particularly convincing. Technical developments in shipbuilding and navigation allowed for them, and economic and demographic pressures motivated them. Ultimately, they initiated a tsunami of trade, interaction, violence, and disease, which continued for centuries. For Jacob Burkhard—one of the "inventors" of the Renaissance—Columbus was the ultimate Renaissance man, illustrating the spirit of inquiry, his exploration representing the action-oriented spirit of the time yet originating in the thoughtful pursuit of knowledge (and reading of Greek texts). Other scholars have pointed to Columbus' Christian proselytizing, instead, as evidence that he was, in fact, more medieval than modern, pursuing the glory of God, not rational knowledge. As Caferro points out, other explorers exhibited "Renaissance" characteristics as well: "Cortes [who conquered the Aztec Empire in Mexico] grandly described his deeds in his diary, in which he compared himself to Julius Caesar and Alexander the Great. His companion Bernal Diaz gave careful detail of local flora and fauna and wild animals, demonstrating a Renaissance appreciation of nature."[13] Whatever the explorer's motivation, exploration was one major part of the Renaissance's global legacy; and its consequences involved ever more global interaction.

Whatever the explorer's motivation, exploration was one major part of the Renaissance's global legacy, and its consequences involved ever more global interaction.

## WHAT PART DID NON-EUROPEAN CULTURES PLAY IN REVITALIZATION?

The other sense in which *global* applies to the period is that the European burgeoning of culture was largely spurred by contact with the East. And easterners themselves were also on the move. Looming very large in this picture is the Ottoman Empire. Large parts of northern Africa, Turkey, and the Balkans had been under the control of the Byzantine Empire until the fifteenth century. The Byzantines thought of themselves as the real Romans as they were all that remained of Rome after the empire in the west had been thoroughly routed by waves of barbarians from the fourth century onward. But in the mid-fifteenth century, the group of formerly nomadic Turkish tribes that became the Ottomans captured Constantinople.

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[13] Caferro, *Contesting the Renaissance*, 39.

Europe, such as it was back then, was deeply shaken by the Turkish success. Although there had been religious differences between the Byzantines and the Roman Catholics (the Fourth Crusade sacked Constantinople in 1204 and set up a Latin kingdom there until 1266), the Byzantine Empire was the last buffer against "real" infidels—Muslim Turks. For the Europeans, therefore, the Byzantines were decidedly the "devil you know." The humanist scholars—those men whispering in the ears of European princes and writing pamphlets for publication across Europe—saw the fall of Constantinople as another fall of Rome. Pope Pius II called it "a second death for Homer and a second destruction of Plato," referring to the destruction of a shared Western (Greek) heritage by foreigners. Says historian Nancy Bishara, "Hence, in the midst of a golden age of learning and the arts, Renaissance Europeans battled fears that a hostile, Islamic enemy to the east could at any moment destroy their world and hurl them back into the 'dark ages.'"[14] The Genoese merchant Jacopo de Promontorio called the sultan Mehmet II a "horrible, cruel, mad and malignant Turk" and was not alone in leveling such unflattering epithets at him.[15] Such talk was ironic, perhaps, bearing in mind that the Genoese, and de Promontorio in particular, who was a trade envoy in the Ottoman court, had long-standing trading privileges with the Ottomans before the conquest of Constantinople and were quick to reestablish commercial ties after it.

While there was, no doubt, panic at the Ottoman conquest, the notion of Europe and the "East" as two distinct entities was, to use a technical term, "fuzzy" at this point in history. East and West were both interpenetrated with each other's history and religion. Historian Jerry Brotton discusses the painting *St. Mark Preaching in Alexandria* (1504–1507) by Gentile and Giovanni Bellini from Venice. The Bellinis depict St. Mark, by tradition the founder of the Christian church in Alexandria, Egypt, preaching to an ethnically mixed crowd in that city. The buildings look simultaneously Egyptian, Byzantine, and Italian (some of Alexandria's better-known buildings, in fact, served as models for Venetian architects). None of this should come as a surprise. Artists like the Bellinis were aware that Europe's cities wanted many things from the grand, ancient empires of the east, such as Mamluk Egypt, Safavid Persia, and the Ottomans: silks, spices, carpets, porcelain, precious stones, and dyes—in addition, of course, to information. This is why the painting evokes both the Western church and the Eastern bazaar, in addition to the classical and the contemporary; the commonalities between Europe and the "East" were considerable, the boundaries fluid.

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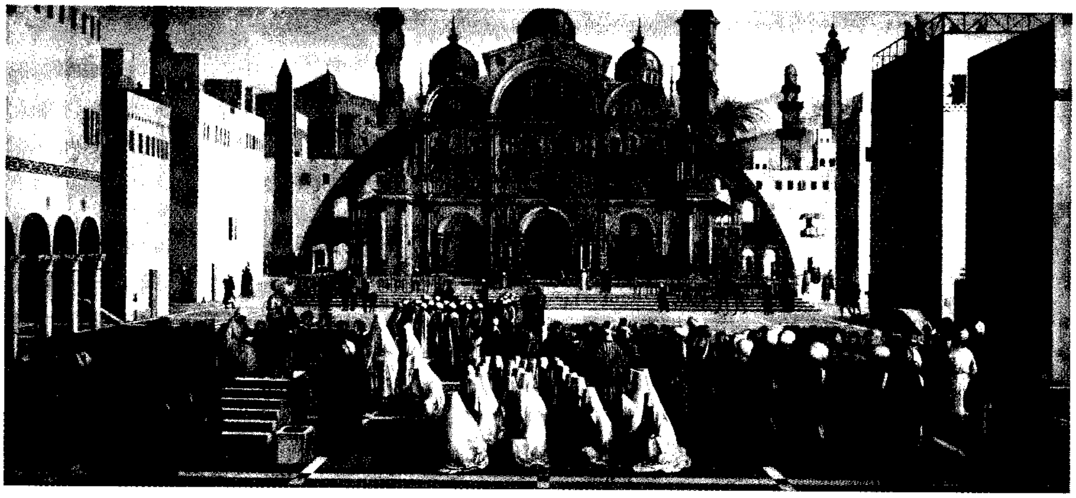
[14] Nancy Bishara, *Creating East and West: Renaissance Humanists and the Ottoman Turks* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 2.

[15] Quoted in Ebru Boyar and Kate Fleet, *A Social History of Ottoman Istanbul* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 8.



**Bellini, Giovanni (ca. 1429–1516) and Gentile (ca. 1429–1507), *St. Mark Preaching in Alexandria*** The Bellinis created a vision of Alexandria in which buildings and people represented a cultural and ethnic mix of East and West, suggesting how each influenced the other at this time.

In the post-Mongol and post-plague years, trade had increased between Europe and points east. Alexandria, being the terminus of the Red Sea trade, bringing goods from India and China, was well known to many in Genoa, Venice, and Florence, which had fought each other over access to its riches. They established trading posts there and in other eastern cities, such as Aleppo and Damascus in modern-day Syria. Painters such as the Bellinis of Venice owed much to certain commodities that came to Europe via the eastern bazaars. Lapis lazuli, vermilion, and cinnabar—pigments that gave the Renaissance painters their brilliant blues and reds—were all imported from the east via Venice. While such commodities revolutionized painting, architecture from cities such as Cairo, Damascus, and Aleppo, among others, directly influenced European tastes. The Rialto market in Venice shows a marked resemblance to certain quarters of Aleppo, Syria's trading entrêpot.

Trade may not be sufficient to break down cultural barriers between people, but notwithstanding European fears, was Mehmet II really as devilish as he was often portrayed? In reality, even as he directed the siege of Constantinople he had scholars read to him daily from the same authorities that appealed so much to the Italian humanists—Herodotus and Livy, among others. Rather than destroy books, Mehmet established a great library, still in existence today, in the Topkapi Palace in Istanbul. Rather than destroy the city, he built edifices reflecting his imperial authority. Ever on the lookout for business opportunities, Venice and Genoa quickly established trading relations with him, and the doge (duke) of Venice wrote letters of friendship to the "Turkish emperor." In 1479 the doge "permitted" Gentile Bellini to work for Mehmet, an example of the considerable cultural as well as economic back-and-forth between Europe and the Ottomans. Historians even question the extent to which historical actors of the time really thought of themselves as absolutely different and separate, as Brotton says: "There were no clear geographical or political barriers east and west in the 15th century. It is a much later, 19th century, belief in the absolute cultural and political separation of the Islamic East and the Christian West that has obscured these two cultures."[16] All this is to say that there was more in common between the Europeans and the Ottomans at this time than has traditionally been supposed.

## HOW DID BUSINESS CHANGE?

Historians argue endlessly over whether the plague initiated a prolonged economic slump, which would seem to be at odds with the apparent flowering of everything else in this period. But in many trading cities wealth became more concentrated, adhering especially to merchant families. These people began to spend lavishly and were responsible for much of the conspicuous consumption that was a hallmark of European economic success. Just as in the art world business was open to outside influences. The Pisan merchant known as Fibonacci (1170–1250), used his commercial exposure to Arabic–Islamic culture to write a series of books on math. Working for his father in Algeria, he was instructed in Arabic–Hindu numerals and calculations: "I enjoyed so much the instruction that I later continued to study mathematics while on business trips to Egypt, Syria, Greece, Sicily, and Provence and there enjoyed discussions and disputations with the scholars of those places."[17]

Hindu–Arabic numerals, he realized, were superior for calculating profit and loss. Basic symbols, such as those for addition (+) subtraction (–), and multiplication (×), were unknown in Europe before Fibonacci, yet the Arabs had been using them for centuries. The Arabic term *al jabru* is the origin of the English word *algebra*. A key figure in the history of mathematics was the Persian astronomer Abu Ja'far Muhammad ibn Musa al-Khwarizmi, whose mangled named in Latin languages gave us *algorithm*—without which there would be no Google. Merchants, dealing with bills of exchange—the earliest form of paper money—used the term *check*, which was another bastardization of an Arabic term, *sakk*. Commerce and business, therefore, were the media through which much cross-cultural exchange occurred in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and such exchange influenced the cultural and intellectual lives of all involved.

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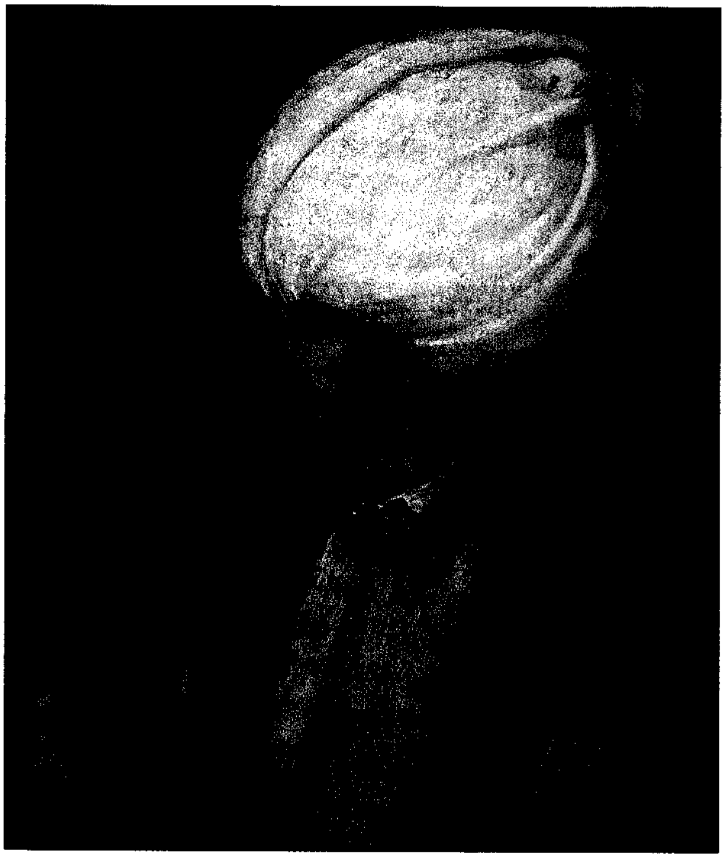
[16] Brotton, *The Renaissance Bazaar*, 53.

[17] Ibid., 43.

## WAS THERE AN OTTOMAN REVITALIZATION?

As we have seen, the Ottomans, like the Italians and other Europeans, enjoyed considerable material prosperity in the period following the fall of Constantinople. Along with it came a cultural flowering not unlike that in Europe. This reached its apex under the sultan Suleyman I (r. 1520–1566), known as "the Magnificent" in the West and "the Lawgiver" to the Ottomans. Suleyman more than doubled the area under Ottoman control (suggesting that he should have been known as "the Conqueror," perhaps) but is remembered most for the cultural productivity during his reign. This period had a lasting impact on Turkish art, especially in the material realm: illuminated manuscripts, inlaid woodwork, decorated armaments, tapestries, silk work, and much more.

At the heart of Suleyman's empire, which stretched from Iran to Austria, was Topkapi Palace, which housed his centralized administration. Attached to the palace were numerous workshops for craftspeople and artists, collectively known as the *Ehl-I Hiref*, or "Community of the Talented." This community was made up of dozens of societies of trades and crafts, from leatherworking to gunsmiths, calligraphers to goldsmiths, glassworkers to weavers. The sultan himself was a trained goldsmith, owing to the tradition that the sovereign should have a practical trade. Such centralization of artistic production had a profound effect on the



**Suleyman the Lawgiver,** known to admiring Europeans as "the Magnificent," presided over the largest expansion of Ottoman territory and a cultural efflorescence, not unlike Europe's Renaissance.

rest of the empire, to which arts and crafts radiated from the center in Istanbul, producing a distinct "Ottoman" style, even if its artists were, variously, from Egypt, northern Africa, Turkey, or Iran.

If the Europeans were having a revitalization, surely the Ottomans were too, especially given that they clearly shared a cultural–economic region with Europe at the time. "During the long sixteenth century," says historian Walter Andrews,

> from approximately 1453 to 1625, Ottoman Turkish culture burgeoned spectacularly, paralleling the broader burgeoning of culture(s) in Europe commonly called "The Renaissance." . . . In very general terms, many of the social and material conditions—everything from economics, agriculture, and labor, to modes of rule, demographics, trade, climate, and public health—that made the European Renaissance possible also existed in the Ottoman empire, and had very similar social and cultural consequences.[18]

Yet no one talks about an Ottoman Renaissance. This is partly because European historians wrote much of the history of the Ottoman Empire and reserved the term *Renaissance* for their own culture; they depicted the Ottomans, on the other hand, as a dying Islamic culture, for which a rebirth seemed like an undesirable turn of events.

Just as urbanization in Europe played a large role in the European expansion, so it was central to Ottoman power and influence. A well-established trading power even before they conquered Constantinople, the Ottomans continued this trend afterward. Mehmet II developed more commercial links, making his new city, as historian Lisa Jardine puts it, a "valve through which goods flowed to and from the oriental markets in the east and the Europeans markets in the west."[19] He also forcibly repopulated the new city with ethnically diverse inhabitants: "He gathered them there from all parts of Asia and Europe, and he transferred them with all possible care and speed, people of all nations, but especially Christians. So profound was the passion that came into his soul for the city and its peopling, and for bringing it back to its former prosperity."[20] Such a repopulating would, Mehmet believed, make it a true cosmopolitan city, a capital to impress Ottomans and foreigners alike.

Politics also played a front-and-center role during this period. Historians have traditionally represented the Ottoman sultans as despotic and Ottoman

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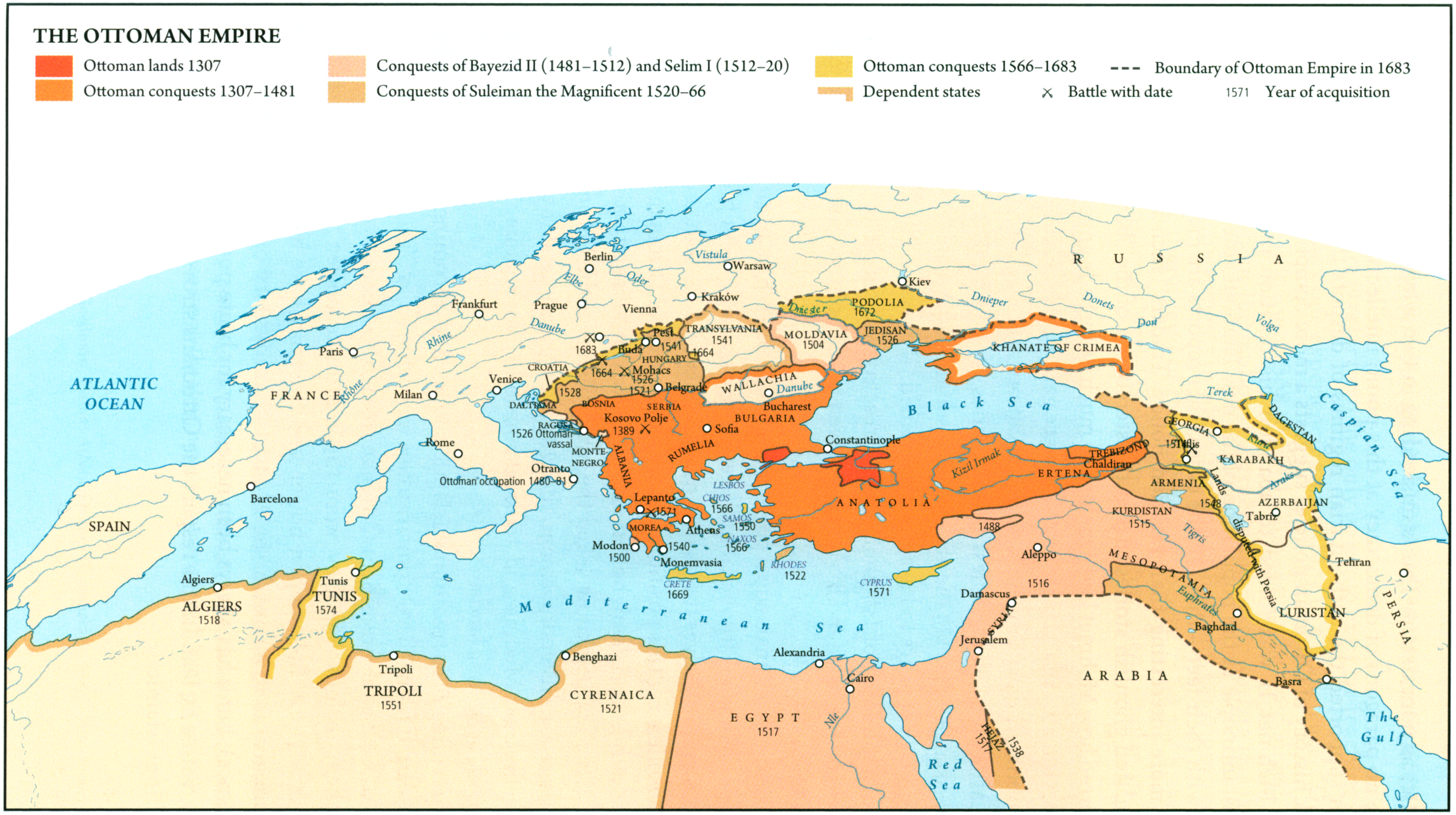
[18] Walter G. Andrews, "Suppressed Renaissance: Q: When Is a Renaissance Not a Renaissance? A: When It Is the Ottoman Renaissance!" In *Other Renaissances: A New Approach to World Literature*, ed. Brenda Deen Schildgen, Gang Zhou, and Sander L. Gilman (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 17.

[19] Lisa Jardine, *Worldly Goods: A New History of the Renaissance* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996), 37.

[20] Asikpasazade, quoted in Boyar and Fleet, *A Social History of Ottoman Istanbul*, 26.


THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE
Ottoman lands 1307
Ottoman conquests 1307–1481
Conquests of Bayezid II (1481–1512) and Selim I (1512–20)
Conquests of Suleiman the Magnificent 1520–66
Ottoman conquests 1566–1683
Dependent states
Boundary of Ottoman Empire in 1683
Battle with date
1571 Year of acquisition
ATLANTIC OCEAN
SPAIN
FRANCE
Paris
Barcelona
Algiers
ALGIERS
1518
Tunis
TUNIS
1574
Tripoli
TRIPOLI
1551
Benghazi
CYRENAICA
1521
Rhine
Rhône
Milan
Frankfurt
Venice
Rome
Otranto
Ottoman occupation 1480–81
Berlin
Elbe
Prague
Danube
Oder
Vienna
Vistula
Warsaw
Kraków
Kiev
1683
Pest
Buda
1541
HUNGARY
1664
Mohacs
1526
1521
Belgrade
CROATIA
1528
DALTIAMA
BOSNIA
SERBIA
RAGUSA
1526 Ottoman vassal
MONTE-NEGRO
ALBANIA
Kosovo Polje
1389
Sofia
RUMELIA
BULGARIA
Bucharest
WALLACHIA
Danube
TRANSYLVANIA
1541
MOLDAVIA
1504
Dniester
PODOLIA
1672
JEDISAN
1526
Dnieper
Donets
Don
KHANATE OF CRIMEA
RUSSIA
Volga
Terek
Lepanto
1571
MOREA
Athens
Modon
1500
1540
Monemvasia
LESBOS
CHIOS
1566
SAMOS
1550
NAXOS
1566
RHODES
1522
CRETE
1669
CYPRUS
1571
Mediterranean Sea
Black Sea
Constantinople
ANATOLIA
Kizil Irmak
ERTENA
TREBIZOND
Chaldiran
GEORGIA
1514
Tiflis
KARABAKH
Kura
DAGESTAN
Caspian Sea
Lands
Araks
ARMENIA
1548
AZERBAIJAN
Tabriz
disputed with Persia
KURDISTAN
1515
Tigris
1488
Aleppo
1516
MESOPOTAMIA
Euphrates
Baghdad
LURISTAN
Tehran
PERSIA
Damascus
SYRIA
Jerusalem
ARABIA
Basra
The Gulf
HEJAZ
1517
1538
Alexandria
Cairo
Nile
EGYPT
1517
Red Sea

**MAP 12.3** **THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE** The Ottoman Empire saw considerable expansion through the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, which continued into the seventeenth. In 1683 its troops were defeated outside Vienna, and this is often taken as the turning of the Ottoman tide.

politics as nonexistent. This is misleading in two ways. First, European leaders were no paragons of democracy at this point; intellectuals such as Machiavelli often supported the authoritarian regimes of despots themselves. Second, the track history of Ottoman policies suggests a more complicated story. For example, Mehmet II was forced to abandon his taxation plans after conquering Constantinople as the population of the new Istanbul voted against them, literally with their feet—they left the city. Other reports are more "exotic," perhaps, and more interesting than taxation policy. Traders (such as de Promontorio) circulated ghoulish stories that fit the stereotype of the "barbarous Turk." One reported how Mehmet loved melons so much he forbade anyone eating a particularly promising one growing in the palace gardens. One of his boy servants ate it, prompting the psychopathic sultan to cut open 14 boys' stomachs (finding it in the last one). But regardless of the stories of violence (by no means alien to Renaissance princes!), the ability of the sultan to do whatever he liked with or to his subjects appears to have been restrained. "No sultan could rule in disregard of the population of Istanbul, and the reactions of people in the streets had an impact on the ruler and his ministers even to the point of influencing the choice of ruler."[21]

While the Renaissance powers of Europe often had a complex relationship with the Roman Catholic Church, resisting it as their power grew, the Ottomans appointed themselves the guardians of the Islamic faith. One major development in consolidating this position was the recognition of Ottoman supremacy by the *sharif* of Mecca, Islam's holiest city, in 1517. While maintaining some independence, the *sharif* acknowledged the overlordship of the Ottoman sultan; and in exchange for this endorsement, the Ottomans guaranteed the pilgrimage routes to Mecca and Medina and took responsibility for maintaining the territorial integrity of Islamic lands.

In ruling over traditional Islamic centers and becoming the commander of the Islamic faith, the Ottoman sultan was referred as "The Shadow of God on Earth." Given the prominent Ottoman role in the Islamic world, it was necessary for them to look like they were the legitimate power. Cynics will say that legitimacy rests solely upon power, and this may have been the case with the Ottomans (as it was with the Mongol Yuan dynasty or the Medici family of Florence); but it has always been necessary for brute power to dress itself, modestly, with a fig leaf. In this respect the Ottomans strove to have the last word in all things Islamic.

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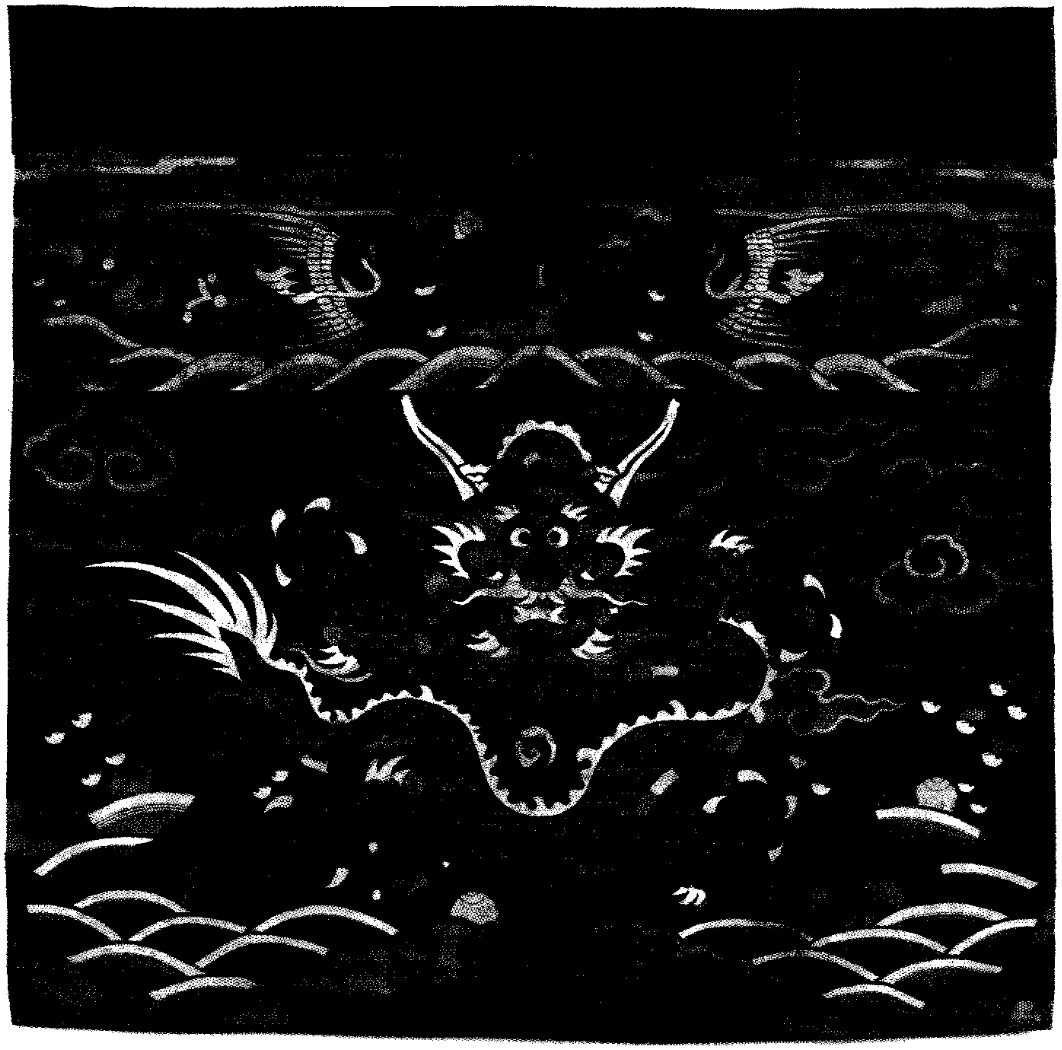
[21] Ibid., 42.

## WHAT DID MING CHINA HAVE IN COMMON WITH EUROPE?

But the Ottoman Empire was far from the only power to exert far-reaching influence. Nor was it the only one experiencing something of a golden age. "During the 276 years of the Ming from 1368 to 1644 China's population doubled, from about 80 million to about 160 million. Destructive domestic warfare was largely avoided, and great achievements in education and philosophy, literature and art, reflected the high cultural level of the elite gentry society."[22] So say historians John King Fairbank and Merle Goldman. Was this, then, similar to what



**Dragons** feature prominently in Chinese art, as in history. In politically uncertain times, sightings of dragons foretold of heaven's disapproval. The Ming, however, witnessed nearly three centuries of relative peace and prosperity.

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[22] John King Fairbank and Merle Goldman, *China: A New History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 128.

happened in Europe? Was it just a golden age like the Ottomans? Historians will no doubt argue it was both and neither—simultaneously. And they would probably be right. There were elements of what you might call the "*very* long sixteenth century" in China that mirrored the European and Ottoman experience. And then there are key areas where China and Europe differed.

Most historians of China see the Song dynasty (960–1279) as more deserving of the word *Renaissance*. In that era China experienced population growth, imperial authority extended farther than ever, technological achievements revolutionized food production and preindustrial processes, and intellectual achievements were as prodigious as Italy's would be later: "Florence in 1500 was crowded with geniuses, moving comfortably between art, literature and politics, but so was Kaifeng in 1100."[23] Like da Vinci in Florence, Shen Kuo (1031–1095) was a Song dynasty statesman whose expertise and learning encompassed mathematics, literature, geology, astronomy, calligraphy, zoology, botany, cartography, agronomy, archeology, ethnography, and finance, among other disciplines. His accomplishments included serving as the minister of astronomy, designing water clocks and pumps for draining thousands of acres of swamps, as well as negotiating treaties with the ever-threatening nomads of the northern frontier. A true "polymath," he was adept in warfare, policymaking, and the fine arts. Like the Europeans, Song emperors looked for ways to continually legitimate their rule and in this endeavor looked back to Confucian texts, like the Europeans who would later look back to Classical ones.

Like the Europeans, Song emperors looked for ways to continually legitimate their rule and in this endeavor looked back to Confucian texts, like the Europeans who would later look back to Classical ones.

But contemporary with European revitalization was the Ming dynasty (1368–1644). The origins of the Ming ("Brilliant") dynasty are not so different from those of the Song. Disunity and conflict characterized the period immediately preceding the Ming, following the collapse of the Mongol Yuan dynasty (1271–1368). The need for legitimacy was also front and center, partly because with such a large country there were always challenges to the central government. But there were also specific challenges to China at this time. Historian Timothy Brook paints a picture of China in this period, which, among other challenges, had to endure the Little Ice Age: "Buffeted by weather anomalies, troubled by the insistent presence of foreign traders in their offshore waters, some people clung to past precedents for guidance. Others cast those precedents aside to conceive of new ways to organize the world and find a place for themselves in it."[24] Both of these strategies could have been applied to the humanists of Europe, who were also struggling to explain their rapidly changing world.

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[23] Morris, *Why the West Rules*, 419.

[24] Timothy Brook, *The Troubled Empire: China in the Yuan and Ming Dynasties* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 1.

In many ways the Ming have even better credentials than the Song for Renaissance status, if only because they were the dynasty that followed nearly a century of hated Mongol rule. The Ming founder, Zhu Yuanzhang (r. 1368–1398), was an orphan at birth and grew up as an impoverished peasant educated by Buddhist monks. After fighting with numerous rebel bands and gangs of outlaws during the series of civil wars accompanying Yuan decline, Zhu began to stitch together an increasingly large territory. Eventually, he felt the time had come to cast modesty aside, name himself *Hongwu* ("Vast Military Power"), and proclaim himself emperor. As Brook describes it, "For most Chinese, 1368 is a key moment in the history of these four centuries, for this is the year in which Zhu's ingenious rebel regime drove out the hated Mongols and re-established China as the realm that the Chinese have come to call 'the Fatherland.'"[25] Historians generally see the Ming as the beginning of China's path to modernity—as the Europeans see their Renaissance. Surely, then, this is a rebirth.

In many ways it was. Confucianism was reestablished as the imperial ideology (a kind of Neo-Neo-Confucianism). This ideology was exemplified by the scholar-bureaucrat Wang Yangming (1472–1529). He was the principal figure behind the Neo-Confucian School of Mind, a school which followed the teachings of Mencius (b. ca. 372 BCE), an earlier Confucian scholar. Like the European scholar-bureaucrats of the time, Wang Yangming was a polymath, quite comfortable in the halls of power, on the battlefield, or in a library. This ideological repositioning occurred during a period of state consolidation as the Ming looked to centralize their control. Commerce, always a major activity in China (regardless of Confucian hostility toward it), benefited from increasing territorial unity and a growing population. The trend toward greater commerce was a continuation of Yuan experience and reflected the age-old Chinese love of material objects; says Brook, "The Yuan and Ming were awash in things. . . . These things were as simple as a chopstick or as common as a teapot, as finely crafted as an eggshell-thin teacup from the Chenghua era (1465–1487) or as elaborate as a sheet of jade carved with miniscule figures playing on a cloud-strewn landscape."[26]

Along with the increase in trade came an increase in urban life. Just as in Europe, population growth and increasing prosperity contributed to an increase in the size of cities. They grew as centers for manufacturing, markets, and residences for the elite. Beijing, with a population of over 500,000, was both a political and a commercial hub. Nanjing boasted up to 700,000 in 1400. Shanghai and Suzhou both had around 1 million people, the former being a major cotton nexus and the latter, the commercial and cultural center of the entire empire. And it was largely commerce that drove this process of growth, more than administration, which was also a contributor.

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[25] Ibid.

[26] Ibid., 196.

So far China seems to have had much in common with Renaissance-era Europe and the Ottoman Near East. But Ming trade differed greatly from its European, Indian, Arab, and Turkish counterparts. The Mongols had been keen on trade, although Khubilai Khan (1215–1294) had closed trade with Japan, having failed to conquer the island several times. But he sent naval fleets into southeast Asia, with conquest in mind; and in their wake came Chinese merchants. Merchants on the Yangtze delta built vast ships and traveled to Japan regardless of government prohibitions. But the Yuan were somewhat schizophrenic in their policy on maritime trade, reflecting perhaps their deep ambivalence about the influence of foreigners. In 1289 they imposed a government monopoly on ocean voyages (to earn revenue). They imposed a complete ban on ocean voyaging in 1303 and lifted it in 1307, having nearly destroyed China's coastal economy. For the next decade the ban was lifted and reimposed several times. The Yuan's ability to control this trade may have been limited however, and foreign merchants still profited greatly from coastal trade, while establishing multiple trading posts on Chinese soil.

The Hongwu emperor was more interested in tribute than trade however. He received embassies from foreign rulers and gladly accepted the goods they offered: "I accept them because they come from far away and show the sincerity of distant peoples."[27] But his attitude to merchants was decidedly negative. He did not think it necessary for anyone to travel more than 8 miles from home. Travel 35 and you would receive a whipping. Contrast this with the globe-trotting Italian merchants, and you begin to see a major cultural difference. But the third Ming emperor, Yongle (r. 1402–1424), took a different approach. Instead of waiting for tribute to come to him, he sent out fleets to make diplomatic contact with foreigners and collect their tribute.

On the surface, Yongle's plan might have resembled Prince Henry the Navigator's, if you substitute tribute for trade; but it could not have been more different. The Chinese voyages ultimately ceased after a few decades, and instead of initiating major, irreversible historical change, they were terminated and their legacy was hidden—by Confucian bureaucrats who considered them a waste of money. The "treasure fleets" did not ultimately make it to Europe, much less America, even if it was entirely within their capability to make such enormous voyages.

These were by far the biggest fleets in history to date, representing what Ian Morris calls the "grandest projection of state power the world had ever seen."[28]

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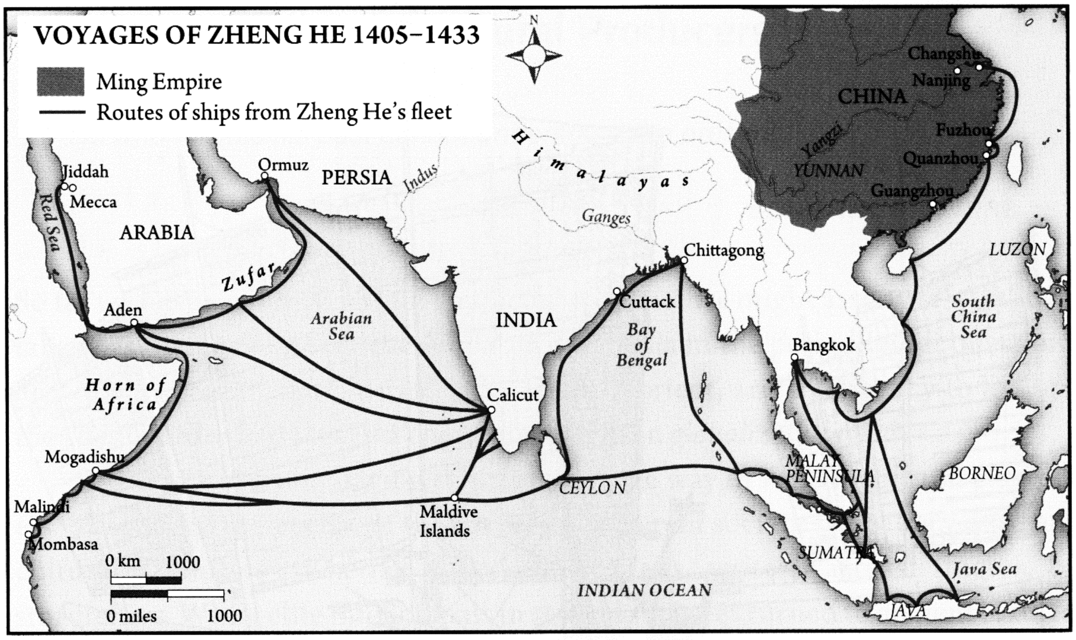
[27] Emperor Hongwu, quoted in Morris, *Why the West Rules*, 406.

[28] Ibid., 408.

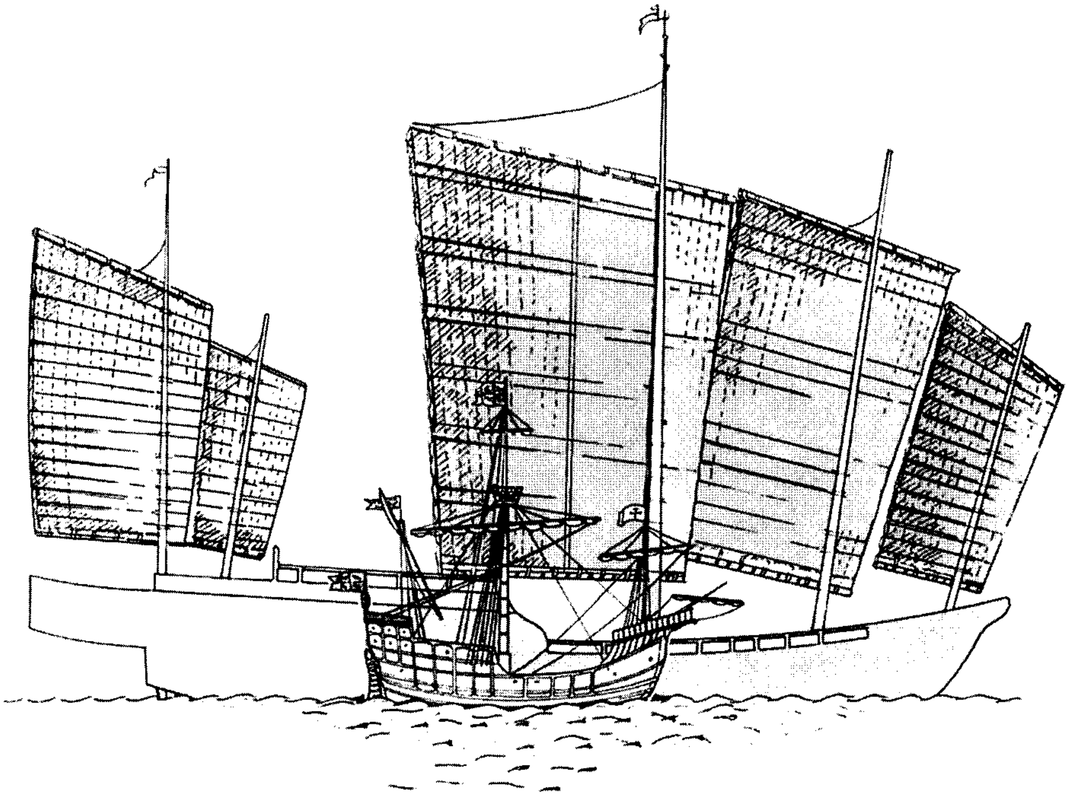

VOYAGES OF ZHENG HE 1405–1433
▨ Ming Empire
— Routes of ships from Zheng He's fleet
N
Jiddah
Mecca
Red Sea
ARABIA
Ormuz
PERSIA
Indus
Himalayas
Ganges
CHINA
Changshu
Nanjing
Yangzi
YUNNAN
Fuzhou
Quanzhou
Guangzhou
Zufar
Aden
Arabian Sea
INDIA
Chittagong
Cuttack
Bay of Bengal
LUZON
South China Sea
Bangkok
Horn of Africa
Calicut
Mogadishu
Malindi
Mombasa
Maldive Islands
CEYLON
MALAY PENINSULA
BORNEO
SUMATRA
Java Sea
JAVA
INDIAN OCEAN
0 km 1000
0 miles 1000

**MAP 12.4** **VOYAGES OF ZHENG HE** The Ming voyages of exploration reached as far as the east coast of Africa. But ultimately they were deemed unsupportable. The Chinese already had a large and fertile trade zone in the Indian Ocean, and this provided well for them.

Yongle assembled 25,000 top craftspeople in boatyards in Nanjing. To acquire the lumber, they clear-cut entire forests and floated the trees down the Yangtze. The fleets themselves were made up of more than 300 vessels (compare Columbus' 3), many of them 300 feet long. The fleet was run by a crew of over 27,000 sailors and commanded by Yongle's chief (Muslim) eunuch, Zheng-He. Between 1405 and 1433, Zheng-He conducted seven voyages and is believed to have reached Ceylon, Mecca, and eastern Africa. After Yongle's death, the voyages suffered a similar fate to coastal trade in general, voyages being banned, then permitted again, then banned again, until by 1500 the ships lay rotting in their yards, unable to venture forth even if allowed.

If we were to practice the "what-if" school of history, we might be inclined to ponder what the world would currently look like if Zheng-He had been allowed to continue his voyages and take his ships farther afield. Would he have "discovered" America instead of Columbus? Would New Yorkers be speaking Chinese? (New Beijing?) Would the Incas have fallen to Chinese soldiers, not Spanish conquistadores?

Why did the Chinese cease the explorations? The most likely cause is not the "conservative ideology" of the Ming, as some scholars have argued. It is more likely that the Chinese halted their travels for rational, economic reasons. While for the Europeans all the world's riches lay elsewhere, China saw itself (not unrealistically) as the center of the world. While the Europeans were spurred by commercial interest to go west and east, the Chinese could rely on foreign goods



**Ming ships dwarfed later European ships** But ultimately the Chinese did not find it economical to send them around the world. The world came to them instead.

coming to them. Geography put the Chinese much farther from the New World, even had they the desire to explore. They had a large and profitable trading zone already on their doorstep in the Indian Ocean, full of Indian and Arab traders visiting their coast. Emperor Yongle, as one of the first Ming leaders, had a rational incentive to send "diplomatic" fleets into the Indian Ocean to gather tribute and "meet the neighbors." Subsequent leaders did not have such an incentive; the voyages had accomplished their goal, establishing them as the regional heavy hitters. Extending voyages into the Pacific provided no guaranteed returns, yet promised gargantuan costs. Given the Chinese preference for tribute and the fact that foreign merchants already came to China, was it any surprise that while the up-and-coming European states were feverishly looking for more money to buy better weapons to use against each other, the Chinese closed in on themselves? Historians Fairbank and Goldman may be partly right that "anticommercialism and xenophobia won out, and China retired from the world scene,"[29] but such a retirement might also have been the result of rational policies, which saw no tangible benefits in global exploration.

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[29] Fairbank and Goldman, *China,* 132.

## What Is the Role of "Cultural Producers"?

*He who forgets his past cannot understand the present.*

SONGHAY PROVERB

So far we have seen that certain characteristics that we might associate with revitalization were present in several places in Eurasia in the period under question: urbanism, economic prosperity, the need to reorient, and a tendency to look to the past in order to do so, in a changing, and even *globalizing*, world.

One major element during this time was the way in which "cultural producers" articulated their sense of the times. But different societies have very different cultural producers—whether they be historians, writers, artists, singers, or storytellers. While elite intellectuals in several societies turned to ancient texts to explain the present and find a "way forward," other societies did not have this option. The western African empire of Songhay (mid-fifteenth to late sixteenth centuries) is a case in point.

Trade and interconnectedness were distinct hallmarks of the western African kingdoms and empires of this period and had been for a long time. As Eric Wolf puts it,

> Africa south of the Sahara was not the isolated, backward area of European imagination, but an integral part of a web of relations that connected forest cultivators and miners with savanna and desert traders and with the merchants and rulers of the north African settled belt. . . . When the Europeans would enter West Africa from the coast, they would be setting foot in country already dense with towns and settlements, and caught up in networks of exchange that far transcended the narrow enclaves of the European emporia of the coast.[30]

In this sense at least, Songhay shared characteristics with the other Eurasian players of this period as noted cities played a major role here, such as the trading entrepôts of Timbuktu, Gao, and Jenne. Several hundred years of Muslim influence had, together with trade, solidified western Africa's ties with the Islamic world, and European exploration along the western African coast represented another avenue of connectivity. The empire building of the early Songhay leadership had sewn together a diverse group of peoples—traders, farmers, river people, and nomads. But Songhay did not have ancient texts, such as the ones to which the Chinese or Europeans looked for guidance. Although a

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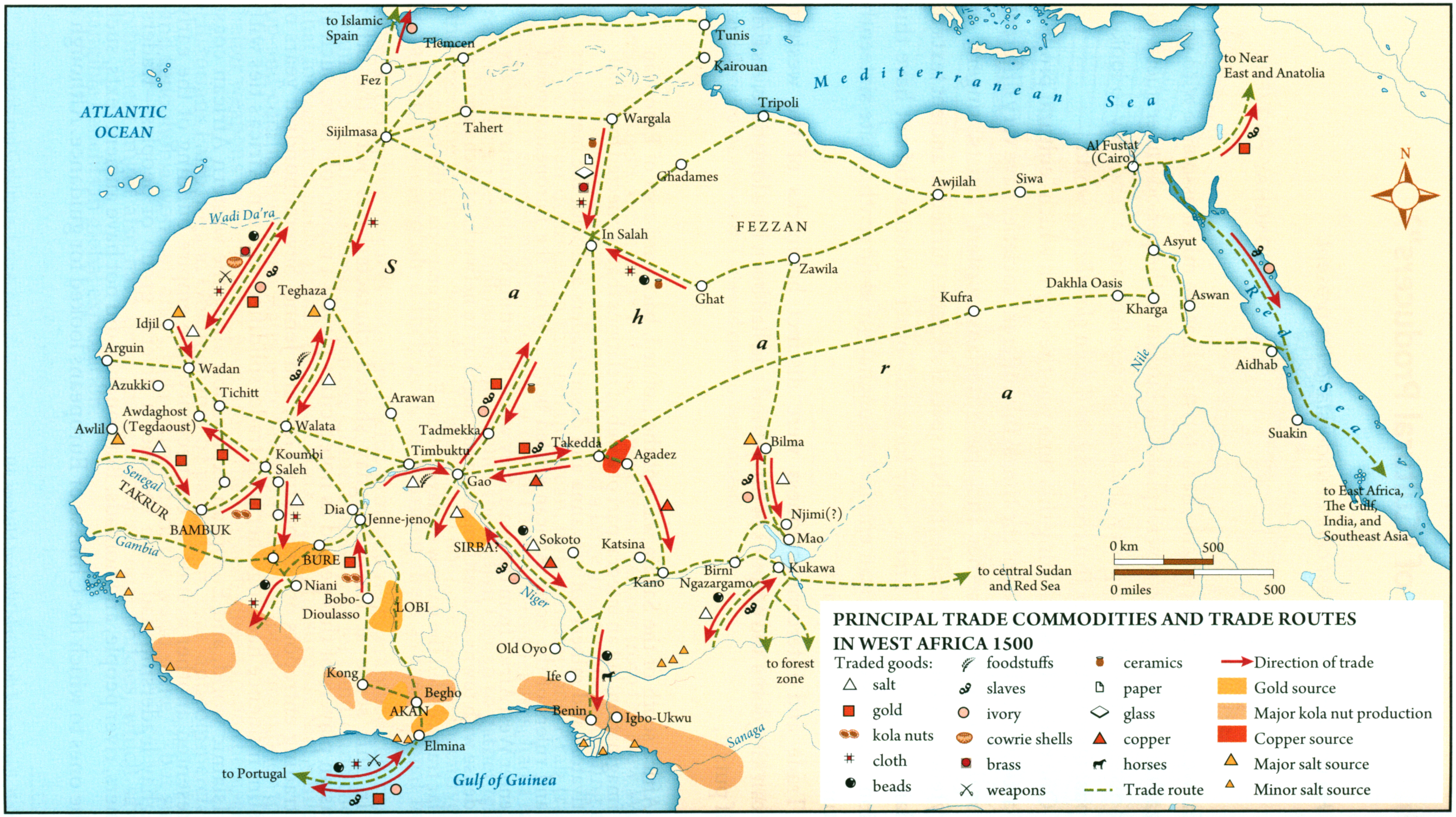
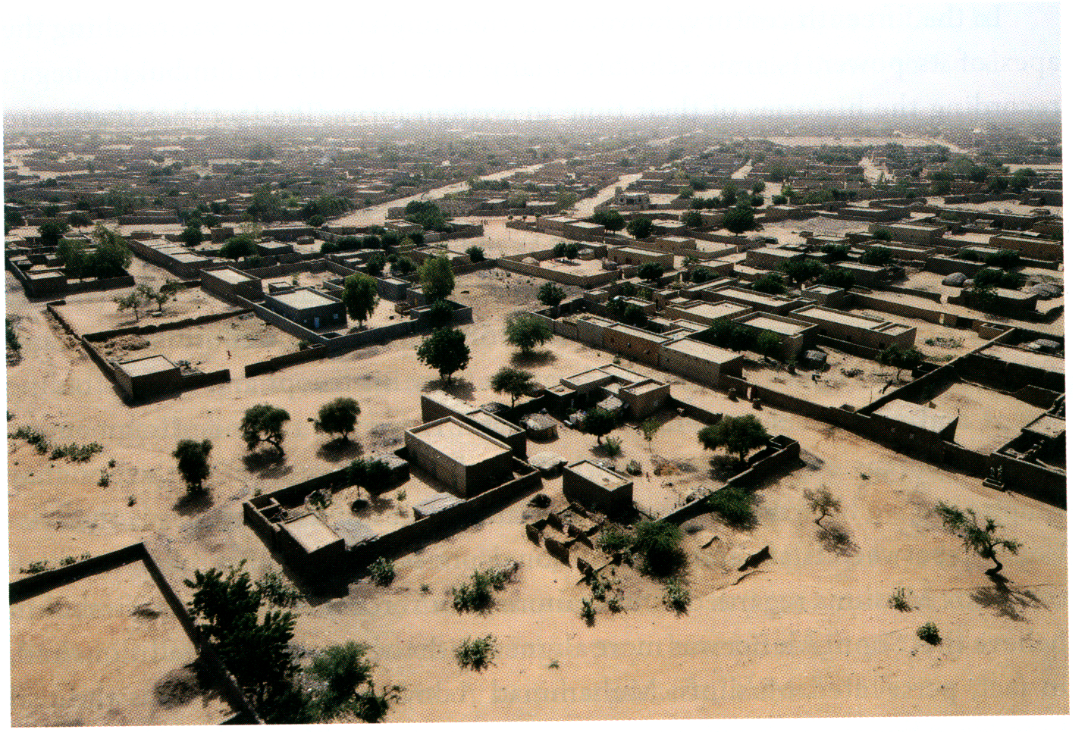
[30] Wolf, *Europe and the People Without History*, 40.


ATLANTIC OCEAN
Mediterranean Sea
Red Sea
Gulf of Guinea
Sahara
FEZZAN
to Islamic Spain
Tlemcen
Fez
Sijilmasa
Tahert
Wargala
Tunis
Kairouan
Tripoli
Ghadames
In Salah
Ghat
Zawila
Awjilah
Siwa
Al Fustat (Cairo)
to Near East and Anatolia
Asyut
Dakhla Oasis
Kharga
Aswan
Kufra
Aidhab
Suakin
to East Africa, The Gulf, India, and Southeast Asia
Nile
Wadi Da'ra
Teghaza
Idjil
Arguin
Wadan
Azukki
Tichitt
Awdaghost (Tegdaoust)
Awlil
Walata
Arawan
Tadmekka
Timbuktu
Takedda
Agadez
Bilma
Njimi(?)
Mao
Kukawa
Koumbi Saleh
Senegal
TAKRUR
BAMBUK
Gambia
Gao
Dia
Jenne-jeno
BURE
Niani
Bobo-Dioulasso
LOBI
SIRBA?
Sokoto
Katsina
Kano
Birni Ngazargamo
Niger
to central Sudan and Red Sea
to forest zone
Old Oyo
Ife
Benin
Igbo-Ukwu
Sanaga
Kong
Begho
AKAN
Elmina
to Portugal
0 km
500
0 miles
500
N
PRINCIPAL TRADE COMMODITIES AND TRADE ROUTES IN WEST AFRICA 1500
Traded goods:
△ salt
■ gold
kola nuts
cloth
● beads
foodstuffs
slaves
○ ivory
cowrie shells
brass
✕ weapons
ceramics
paper
◇ glass
▲ copper
horses
Trade route
Direction of trade
Gold source
Major kola nut production
Copper source
Major salt source
Minor salt source

**MAP 12.5** **COMMODITIES AND TRADE IN WEST AFRICA, ca. 1500** The wealth of Songhay was directly related to its control of ancient and lucrative trade routes linking different ecological niches such as northern Africa, the coast, sub-Saharan Africa, and the Nile valley.



**Today's Timbuktu, Conquered by Sonni Ali Ber in 1468** The tension between Islam and traditional belief systems was central to Mali, as it still is today.

literary tradition developed in cities like Timbuktu and Gao, it came along with the region's conversion to Islam and always existed in parallel with the oral traditions of the Songhay people. Oral traditions were not recorded in books, nor was there a long tradition of written commentary on politics, philosophy, religion, or other cultural matters.

Nonetheless, history, politics, and religion all found a place, as they do to this day, in African oral tradition. And there was nothing anecdotal or haphazard about this; the *marabouts*, or Islamic scholars, of northern and western Africa are part of an organized lineage of specialists who receive the traditions from their seniors and pass them on to their juniors. Malian scholar Hassimi Oumarou Maiga describes the lineage of one such *marabout*, who is the grandson of 34 grandfathers, all of whom have been *marabouts*, many from Goa, the political capital of the Songhay Empire. Such a genealogy qualifies a *marabout* to tell stories, such as that of the origins of the Songhay kingdom (which later became an empire). As Maiga records one tradition, "At that time, (the kingdom of) Koukya, which extended as far as Dahomey (Benin today), and whose capital was Bentia, was administered by Koungorogossi Gariko. He was the son of Gariko Mallenke Songhoy."[31]

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[31] Hassimi Oumarou Maiga, *Balancing Written History with Oral Tradition: The Legacy of the Songhoy People* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 34.

In the fifteenth century, however, as the Songhay Empire was reaching the apex of its power, Islamic scholars, many from the city of Timbuktu, began recording the histories of their time in written form. The fact that they were Muslim is of paramount significance here; Islam is a literary religion, one that places great importance on the written word. These histories told the story of the rise of Sonni Ali Ber (r. 1464–1492) and the Askiya dynasty that followed him. Sonni Ali Ber had come from Goa and had conquered the elite (largely Muslim) trading town of Timbuktu in 1468. From here he continued to campaign along the Niger River, using boats to ferry his troops and taking trading towns and cities such as Jenne and Walata. However, there is disagreement among Malians even today as to who was the true "founder" of the Songhay Empire. As we have noted, one of the main themes of the histories is the relationship between Islam and the traditional, pre-Islamic animist religion, which orthodox Muslims regarded as little more than sorcery. Many from Timbuktu believe that Sonni Ali Ber was more aligned with the pre-Islamic traditions and, in fact, persecuted Muslims. Muhammad Askiya, they believe, was the real founder of Songhay. Other people, in particular from cities such as Kukiya, see Sonni Ali Ber as the true founder of the empire and a great sorcerer (who happened to also be a Muslim). The tension between Islamic and animist traditions continues today, as historian Christopher Wise puts it: "In modern-day Timbuktu, the Muslim population continues to venerate the Askiya Muhammad for his piety and for his respect for Islam, whereas the citizens of Gao tend to view him as a great sorcerer."[32]

The writers of the histories (*ta'rikh* in Arabic) tended to be Muslims, many from Timbuktu, while the oral storytellers, *marabouts* and *griots,* tended to be animists. The authors of books such as the *Ta'rikh al fattash* might well be comparable to England's Thomas More or Italy's Machiavelli, who both wrote historical/political works with decidedly political motivations. In the histories we plainly see the contemporary concerns of the historians and a less than objective tone betraying their sycophancy to those in power. Here is the author of the *Ta'rikh al fattash*, the Muslim Hajj Mahmud Kati (b. 1468), praising the Askiya Muhammad, the ruler of the Songhay at the time of the book's writing:

> In the midst of our darkness and obscurity this great prince brought the light of the true faith to shine upon us. He directed us towards the path of

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[32] *Ta'rikh al fattash: The Timbuktu Chronicles 1493–1599,* ed. and trans. Christopher Wise (London, Africa World Press, 2011), xiv.

> righteousness and extirpated our errors and inequities. Thanks be to God, he subjugated princes and emissaries from far and wide. Some of these submitted to him one-by-one, others in large groups.[33]

As we have seen in the cases of China and the Ottoman Empire, leaders have to constantly legitimize their rule. But as we have also seen repeatedly in this volume, the written word plays a very prominent role in history, particularly in the legitimating process. What anthropologist Jack Goody has called the "tyranny of the text" means that histories that are recorded in books often have the last word. Books, and literature in general, played a very important role in the early modern world, especially in Europe's Renaissance. But oral traditions, such as those of the Songhay, clearly functioned in similar ways to written texts, as a means to legitimate the present. While the Songhay produced textual history, those histories drew upon the ancient oral traditions that preceded them, often reproducing much of the material that was circulated by word of mouth. But because such historical writing was more associated with the elite Muslim communities within the empire, it naturally reflected their point of view.

But oral traditions, such as those of the Songhay, clearly functioned in similar ways to written texts, as a means to legitimate the present.

## What Relevance Does This Period Have for Nonstate Societies?

It would be as well to remember at this point that only what we are calling "state societies" could even be in a position to have a revitalization. The main reason for this is related to literacy and the above-mentioned cultural producers, neither of which pertain to nonstate societies. Most, in other words, do not preserve their histories in writing; and although they have cultural producers, these tend to be oral in nature and are therefore more difficult to trace historically. In the fifteenth century, most people on earth did not live in state societies. Even those who did had only marginal dealings with the authorities since the medieval and early modern states had far less power over their populations than do modern states. Living in the outer reaches of the Ottoman, Ming, or Songhay Empires, one might see evidence of the empire only every few years—usually in the form of some tax collector.

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[33] Ibid., 24.

But the alternatives to state societies were hunter–gatherer bands and other nomadic, pastoralist groups. These inhabited large territories in agriculturally marginal locations. In the far north, the Inuit hunter–gatherers occupied large parts of what is now Greenland and northern Canada. Farther south, in today's United States, tribal groups made up the bulk of human societies; even though urban centers had flourished previously in Cahokia and Chaco Canyon, these were long gone by 1500. And farther south, in Central and South America, although states had existed since Olmec times, nonstate groups were also very common. In parts of Africa where Bantu farmers had not settled, hunter–gatherers occupied the Kalahari Desert in the south and the jungles and rain forests of central and western Africa. In the Pacific, tribal societies existed in hundreds of islands and archipelagos, most of which did not reach what anthropologists and political scientists would call "states" for several hundred years. The same is true of Australia, Tasmania, and the islands of New Zealand and New Guinea, which were all occupied by hunter–gatherer tribal peoples, practitioners of the "Old Way."

A large section of southeast Asia was similarly devoid of state control until the nineteenth century and after. This area is largely, like many other nonstate regions, inhospitable to the state because its mountainous geography makes the projection of state power challenging. Like deserts, jungles, and frozen tundra, it is impossible to march giant armies into this terrain, let alone resupply troops. Historian Willem van Schendel coined the term *Zomia* to describe this area, deriving from several Tibetan–Burmese languages (*Zo* meaning "remote" and *Mi* meaning "people"); this area comprised parts of today's Burma, Tibet, Vietnam, China, Bangladesh, Thailand, Nepal, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, among others. Many of these areas are still beyond state control, such as Pakistan's infamous Northwest Frontier Province, a haven for the Taliban. In the 1300s, the eastern parts of this area became something of a refuge from the civilizing power of China's early Ming dynasty. People, in other words, retreated from the state into hard-to-reach regions where governments could not penetrate and tribal life could continue.

Prestate societies, therefore, are not just waiting to be "civilized" but have actively sought out places where the state cannot reach them.

Anthropologist James C. Scott, who has written about Zomia (see Chapter 10), argues that these tribal societies are not "our living ancestors," that is to say, simply "prestate," but that they have actively chosen not to develop state institutions as a conscious act of resistance. For all of its much vaunted civilization, he argues, the state is actually a form of repression, involving taxation, forced labor, and serfdom. Prestate societies, therefore, are not just waiting to be "civilized" but have actively sought out places where the state cannot reach them.

In this context, the characteristics of a Renaissance or revitalization—urbanism, prosperity through trade, cultural exchange, and ideological revisionism—are all largely irrelevant to the Zomias of the world. However, the nonstate societies were often influenced by large states; a case in point here are the nomads who frequently threatened China's northern borders. Referred to by anthropologist Thomas Barfield as "shadow empires," such societies on the borders of large states often expanded and contracted as the state did. Expanding states, such as those under the Ming or Song, usually created larger shadow empires in the steppes as the nomads benefited from trade with the expanding state. Such nonstates have often been assumed to have "no history," to have existed unchanged for centuries. In reality, of course, these societies, like all others, have changed, the specific changes being known only in the oral traditions of each society and being largely undocumented.

## Conclusion: Was There a Global Renaissance?

We cannot talk about a "global Renaissance" for the simple reason that in the fifteenth century nothing was global. However, the period from the beginning of the fifteenth to the end of the sixteenth centuries does give us the first glimpses of truly global interaction, if for no other reason than the divide between Eurasia and the Americas is permanently bridged (in 1492). Now it is possible to speak about "world history."

In many ways the idea of a renaissance is as old as history. All societies experience new developments; all of them look over their shoulders for a sense of continuity or to retrieve something they feel they may have lost along the way. Clearly, then, the Europeans were not alone in this. The notion of "renaissance" is a universal one, even if the term itself originated in Europe in the nineteenth century to explain revitalization. Whether or not the entire globe experienced a renaissance in this period is doubtful, although many societies experienced some of the attributes that are often associated with it. Looking deeply into the realities of the Renaissance shows us that history is ultimately about rhetoric; historians create stories, some of them more persuasive than others, but many of which take on the luster of reality, according to how many people subscribe to them and for how long.

## Words to Think About

Bourgeoisie
Griots
Periodization
Presentism
Renaissance humanism

## Questions to Think About

- In what ways did Renaissance European women benefit or not from the Renaissance?
- Is the Renaissance a meaningful historical period?
- Which Chinese dynasty has a better claim to its own Renaissance, the Ming or the Song?
- In what ways did the Songhay Empire represent a Renaissance?

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